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DEPARTMENT FOR NEA/ELA MGREGONIS, NEA/PI TCWITTES

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TAGS: PGOV PREL PHUM KDEM KMPI KWMN JO  
SUBJECT: JORDAN: GOVERNMENT, CIVIL SOCIETY, AND YOUTH  
DISCUSS REFORM CHALLENGES WITH DAS WITTES

Classified By: Ambassador R. Stephen Beecroft for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

**¶1.** (S/NF) Summary: In meetings with NEA Deputy Assistant Secretary Tamara Wittes January 26-28, government officials, representatives of civil society, and alumni of Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI) programs discussed the challenges of democratic reform and sought further U.S. assistance to support Jordan during this critical election year. DAS Wittes took the opportunity to reiterate U.S. support for democratic reform in Jordan and also stressed the crucial role Jordanians themselves have in ensuring free, fair, and transparent elections; in creating a vibrant civil society and partnerships that connect public and private sectors; and in tapping into the capable and dynamic power of Jordan's youth. End Summary.

PUBLIC TRUST AND THE REFORM FORMULA

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**¶2.** (S/NF) Minister of Political Development Musa Maaytah, in his meeting with DAS Wittes January 26, outlined the government's efforts "to create faith in the process" of democratic reform. He said the dissolution of parliament was a necessary step, backed by 85 percent of the Jordanian people, according to a recent survey. The former parliament was "impossible to work with," he said, citing corrupt practices, parliamentarians' inexperience in the political sphere, and a lack of trust on the part of the public. He spoke optimistically about new PM Rifai, saying, "It is not easy to make reforms, but this one wants it." New codes of conduct regulating relations between ministries and the parliament as well as between ministries and the press will help prevent misuse of power and restore public trust in the government, he said.

**¶3.** (S/NF) Minister Maaytah and DAS Wittes agreed that 2010 will be a critical year for electoral reform. The minister said the government was engaging in a "strategic dialogue" to develop an electoral law to address the voting system, districting, and the quota for women MPs. He said he envisioned a system that more accurately represents the large population of urban areas and a higher quota for women MPs, from the current six to twelve (possibly one from each governorate). The minister described what he called a "formula for reform," whereby those benefiting from the status quo do not lose more than they can afford to lose, so that they do not become spoilers; and those that stand to gain from the reform gain enough to keep faith in the process.

**¶4.** (S/NF) Maaytah emphasized that progress in electoral reform must be accomplished "step by step," in order to resist conservative elements and said that 2010 will be a critical year not only for electoral reform, but for stability in Jordan, as well. While stressing that reform must be "home-grown" and citing his ministry's plans to work

with civil society on an awareness campaign and candidate training before elections, he asked for further U.S. assistance, perhaps in training new parliamentarians after elections. He also stressed USG's political and diplomatic role in pressing forward a reform agenda with the GOJ. "The next year will be challenging for us as reformers, and we need political support in resisting conservative forces," he said. DAS Wittes encouraged the minister to look at the coming year as an opportunity to improve representation, expand the public's confidence in the government, and carry out reforms for a more democratic and transparent system.

#### CIVIL SOCIETY AND THE PROTECTION OF THE VULNERABLE

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15. (S/NF) In a meeting with DAS Wittes January 27, Minister of Social Development Hala Latouf described challenges her ministry faces in the "bumpy" path of democratic reform as it aims to help Jordan's most vulnerable groups. She conceded that her ministry is viewed by some as weak, but not because of a lack of political will. "It's a big task to protect and assist the poor, the marginalized, the handicapped, the elderly -- especially when we must play politics," she said. She explained that the ministry tackles the more thorny issues of domestic violence, so-called honor killings, and women's rights as "family issues," in order to be more culturally acceptable and that she sometimes calls on local religious leaders to issue fatwas protecting women and children in order to change behavior and raise awareness. She said that the momentum on democratic reform should be kept "slow and steady," to avoid setbacks with the Islamists.

AMMAN 00000314 002 OF 002

16. (S/NF) On the controversial associations law passed by the parliament in 2009, Latouf said it was "not an easy law" given the conservative tendencies and conspiracy theories on the part of MPs regarding civil society and foreign influence. However, she said that the end result was a good law that sets the stage for progress. The law created a board of registrars that includes representatives from civil society, established the notion of good governance, and set a standard for the government's delivery of service, all of which aim at more transparency and less corruption, she said.

At the same time, the minister conceded that the board will consider security issues and cultural sensitivities in approving or denying organizations' registration. DAS Wittes underscored the importance of a vibrant civil society and assurances of a transparent process, especially in the lead-up to elections; to which Latouf responded, "We would like more assurances, but that would be a hard fight right now."

17. (S/NF) DAS Wittes and the minister discussed the opening of Dar Al Wefaq, a women's shelter providing a range of social services, counseling, legal assistance, and other services as a one-stop-shop model and the first of its kind in the Middle East region. Mentioning that this initiative began as a MEPI project to create public-private partnerships, DAS Wittes commended Latouf for her leadership in the project and cited it as a model for effective partnerships. Minister Latouf agreed and said that the MOSD is planning to open another shelter in the southern town of Ma'an. She added, however, that the bulk of service provision continues to fall to the ministry and that civil society organizations, with the exception of a few large ones, have not been stepping up to the plate. With a 100 percent increase in reported cases, the ministry's resources are overstretched, she said, "and there's no way the government alone can keep up." Civil society, she said, needs to be more engaged and bear more responsibility to create meaningful public-private partnerships.

YOUTH

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¶ 8. (U) During her visit to Amman, DAS Wittes met with numerous youth from the MEPI Alumni Network, MEPI local grants projects, USAID programs, the media, and civil society. She repeatedly emphasized that the youth demographic is key to Jordan's democratic reform path and urged youth to take an active leadership role in shaping the dialogue and affecting change. At a dinner with MEPI alumni young professionals hosted by Ambassador Beecroft, the DAS initiated a discussion on the respective roles of the private sector and civil society in helping advance societal development, sparking a livey exchange of views on the subject of whether private and public sectors can partner effectively, or whether their different motivations prevent cooperation. Some argued that the private sector -- and even civil society organizations -- can only go so far without significant government action on reform. Overall, however, the youth seemed energized and encouraged by the DAS to seek ways to make a difference in their communities.

¶ 9. (S/NF) Comment: DAS Tamara Wittes' visit to Jordan yielded productive discussions with government officials, civil society, program partners, and youth on the challenges Jordan faces in the year ahead, particularly on democratic reform. Her engagement with these groups served as a good opportunity to reiterate the U.S. commitment to and support of free, fair, and transparent elections, a vibrant civil society, freedom of expression (see septel), and youth empowerment. End comment.

¶ 10. (U) This cable was cleared by DAS Tamara Wittes.

Beecroft